

Russian television's *Trotsky* serial: A degraded spectacle of historical falsification and anti-Semitism

By Fred Williams and David North
25 November 2017

Russian television marked the hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution with the broadcast of an eight-part serial titled *Trotsky*. The series is an exhibition of the political, intellectual and cultural depravity of all those involved in the sponsorship and production of this grotesque falsification of history. No excuses can be made for anyone—the producers, director, scriptwriters, actors and assorted technical personnel—who participated in this mixture of lies, pornography, anti-communism and blatant anti-Semitism. They deserve, individually and collectively, nothing but contempt. Their association with this pathologically reactionary enterprise will define their careers forever.

To the extent that this *Trotsky* has any enduring significance, it is as a demonstration of the fear and hatred of the October Revolution held by the Russian regime and the oligarchical elite. A quarter century after the dissolution of the USSR, the Putin regime—which more or less openly promoted this film and welcomed its broadcast on *Kanal Pervyi* (the most prominent TV channel) as an official event—cannot allow anything approaching an objective and honest portrayal of the October Revolution.

Above all, the Putin regime and the semi-criminal cabal of oligarchs who owe their current power and wealth to the theft of state assets that followed the restoration of capitalism require the perpetuation of the anti-Trotsky narrative. The lies that were employed to justify Stalin's terror eighty years ago remain the foundation of official Russian history. The television serial departs from the script of the Moscow Trials of 1936-38 only in its more explicit reliance on anti-Semitism.

Stalin's regime, which still sought to present itself as the political continuity of the 1917 socialist revolution, portrayed Trotsky as the agent of British imperialism, German fascism, and the Japanese Mikado. Putin's government, which strives to represent itself as the resurrection of Holy Russia, portrays Trotsky as the Judeo-Bolshevik anti-Christ. In fact, the main poster advertising the series consists of a frightening image of Trotsky dressed in black and with his eyes concealed by sunglasses in which a hell-like fire is reflected. Attached to his chest is a bloodstained cross.

No doubt the Russian Orthodox Church, today's official state religion, gave its blessing to the depiction of Trotsky as a demonic, Mephistophelian figure. Trotsky is joined by a contrived portrayal of another Jewish socialist, Alexander Parvus (Gelfand), the alleged mastermind of behind-the-scenes treachery. What is it that motivates Parvus' scheming? In this anti-Semitic horror story, the answer is insatiable greed.

In various interviews, the film's directors, Aleksandr Kott and Konstantin Statskii, and the scriptwriter, Oleg Malovichko, have explained their conception of the film's principal character. "Trotsky was a rock star, lacking only a guitar." Kott and Statskii do not provide Trotsky with a guitar. Instead, they clad him in black leather, surround

him with women groupies, and supply him with hallucinations, not necessarily drug-induced, but the product of a tormented soul.

The actor chosen to play the role of Trotsky, Konstantin Khabensky, had already played Trotsky a decade ago, somewhat sympathetically, in the film *Esenin*. According to Konstantin Ernst, one of the new series' main producers and general director of Channel One, "[Khabensky] had played him incorrectly, and we discussed this with Kostya. He took everything into account and understood what and how he would act now." Khabensky apparently learned his lesson well. He notes on the film's website: "Trotsky was a terrible man with a terrible fate. ... Nothing in Trotsky attracted me." This is a confession of artistic bankruptcy. With this statement Khabensky denies the character that he has been selected to portray any identifiable element of humanity.

The plot device upon which the film turns is bizarre and totally unconnected to historic reality. The screenwriters fabricate a close and prolonged relationship between Trotsky and the man who will ultimately murder him. His assassin, Frank Jacson (Ramon Mercader) poses as a Canadian journalist (untrue) and approaches Trotsky for a series of interviews (which in real life were never sought or granted). After first refusing, Trotsky agrees to the interviews, although he knows that Jacson is a fervent Stalinist! Trotsky then nonchalantly strolls through the streets of Mexico City with Jacson (another fiction), who soon becomes a close confidant and welcome guest in the Trotsky household. These lengthy confessions, as concocted by the screenwriter, begin in May 1940, the time of the first attempted assassination carried out by the painter David Siqueiros and his gang of Stalinist killers. They continue into August 1940, right up to the day of the assassination, August 20 (wrongly dated August 21 by the filmmakers).

As scriptwriter Malovichko explains: "Jacson is the eyes and ears of the viewer. As the interviewer, he helps us penetrate into the secrets of Trotsky's personality. ... We wanted to ask Trotsky uncomfortable questions, those that he avoided in his memoirs and other writings. Why, for instance, did he kill so many people? Using the interviews between Jacson and Trotsky, we could ask those uncomfortable questions. We wanted to make Jacson something like Trotsky's inner voice, a voice that he always wanted to stifle."

The many flashbacks to Trotsky's earlier life provide a monstrously distorted view of Trotsky's biography. The list of distortions and falsifications is so long, it would take a book to refute all of them.

In one of the earliest scenes chronologically, in an Odessa prison in 1898, the 19-year-old "Leiba" Bronstein is presented as a young Jewish upstart who doesn't understand the Russian people. As is typical in anti-Semitic portrayals of the young Bronstein, he is assigned the name Leiba, the Yiddish form of the Russian name Lev. In fact, Lev was the young Bronstein's first name. But that is a comparatively minor

distortion, compared to what follows.

Bronstein/Trotsky has been arrested and imprisoned. It is there in prison that the young revolutionary forms his political philosophy, which is inspired not by books, but by advice from an unlikely mentor. The prison warden, Nikolai Trotsky, teaches him over a game of chess that the Russian people can be ruled only by fear. Meanwhile, he angrily declares, the naïve dreams of the young revolutionary will lead only to the nightmarish vision in a quote allegedly from Dostoevsky: “And then, in the 21st century, to the accompanying howl of the triumphant mob, a degenerate will pull a knife from his boot, climb the stairs to the marvelous image of the Sistine Madonna [a painting by Raphael seen by Dostoevsky in a Dresden museum], and slash this image in the name of universal equality and brotherhood.” Thus, Bronstein learns a basic lesson: the Russian people will only be controlled through fear, but he must learn to unleash the mob to gain power. The Jacson of 1940 quizzically asks: “So you took his last name?” Trotsky replies: “I not only took it, I made it immortal.”

Another fictional explanation for the formation of Trotsky’s “bloodthirsty” personality is the personal torment caused by his Jewish identity. Trotsky is mocked for being Jewish by, among others, his father, Stalin, Lenin, and Nikolai Markin (a sailor close to Trotsky who is much maligned in the film). The other malevolent Jew who plays a major role in this film is Alexander Parvus. This historic figure as presented in the film series is a crude caricature of the real personality. In the serial, Parvus is nothing but a lecherous and money-mad adventurer, seeking to destabilize Russia at the behest of the German government (beginning in 1903!). In fact, Parvus was for many years recognized as a major political theorist and strategist in the Russian and European social democratic movement. In 1897, he was one of the first to challenge Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism, and in 1904-1906 he actively engaged in helping develop Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. It was after 1907, following the defeat of the first Russian Revolution, that Parvus became politically demoralized, and became involved in dubious commercial activities that were to shatter his reputation.

But Parvus’ complex personality is dissolved into the sort of scheming money-grubber conjured up in anti-Semitic propaganda films produced by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945.

The treatment of Lenin, though without anti-Semitic overtones (the Bolshevik leader was not Jewish), is an absurd portrayal of this monumental historical figure. He is presented as a scheming megalomaniac, the epitome of an utterly ruthless and inhuman “will to power.” No one can escape his drive to dominate and control. On the eve of the Second Congress in 1903, Lenin even threatens to drop Trotsky onto the street below (from a third-floor balcony) if he doesn’t follow his instructions at the upcoming congress. Later, Trotsky hands over power to Lenin after leading the insurrection in 1917, as Stalin approvingly looks on.

Natalia Sedova, Trotsky’s second wife, is treated as a Bohemian in Paris who is captivated by Trotsky’s take-down of Freud at a lecture in Vienna, an event which, like innumerable episodes in the serial, never happened. But Freud is used to provide further “insights” into Trotsky’s character. First of all, in 1903, he looks into Trotsky’s eyes and tells him that he has seen such eyes only among “serial killers and religious fanatics.” At the same time, he notes that Trotsky’s behavior at the lecture was that of a “sexual aggressor” who cannot satisfy his aggressive impulses, due, perhaps, “to weakness.” Later, in 1940, Freud appears before Trotsky in a hallucination that once again is the scriptwriter’s scurrilous concoction. After Trotsky assures Freud that he has not succumbed to “weakness” and is not afraid of dying, Freud adds: “You know who is not afraid of dying? One who is already dead inside.” The episode ends, punctuated by dark and ominous music, but anyone the least bit familiar with Trotsky’s vigorous fight to build the Fourth International

(founded in 1938) and defeat Stalinism will know that Trotsky was hardly a man who was “already dead inside.” These scenes embody bad psychology, worse history and debased filmmaking.

Other characters deserve mention. The sailor Nikolai Markin (1893-1918) is treated as a buffoonish, drunken semi-gangster (shaking down a pawnshop owner, for instance), who not only helps Trotsky and his family in 1917, but inexplicably has considerable authority among fellow sailors at Kronstadt and among delegates at the Petrograd Soviet. Markin and the Kronstadt sailors are portrayed as the main element in overthrowing the Provisional Government, acting, however, as an uncontrolled mob; workers are hardly seen, and peasants are completely out of the picture. Markin’s death in the Civil War near Kazan was a genuine tragedy aptly described in Trotsky’s *My Life*, but the young hero is used in the film mainly to suggest that he had an affair with Natalia Sedova (Jacson tells Trotsky that there were rumors to that effect), a total invention by scriptwriter Malovichko.

Meanwhile, the revolutionary journalist Larisa Reisner and the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo are introduced semi-pornographically to titillate the audience and illustrate Bolshevik sexual immorality.

The scenes conjured up in *Trotsky* are at one moment absurd, at another despicable, and often a combination of the two. The directors cannot contain their malicious glee as they show in quick succession the deaths of Trotsky’s four children: Nina (coughing up blood on her deathbed in 1928); Zinaida (committing suicide in Berlin in 1933); Sergei Sedov (being shot by Stalin’s executioners in 1937); and Lev Sedov (injected with poison while recovering in a clinic in Paris after an appendix operation).

Of all the many historical falsifications, the worst is the final scene dealing with the assassination of Trotsky in August 1940. With Jacson/Mercader in the next room, Natalia and Trotsky receive a telegram from the Canadian consulate explaining that Jacson is not a Canadian citizen as he has claimed. They realize that Jacson is a GPU assassin. But, after Trotsky tells Natalia that he loves her, he willingly goes to meet his fate at Jacson’s hands. When Jacson appears reluctant to carry out his assignment, Trotsky starts beating him with his walking stick. Finally, in self-defense, Jacson grabs an alpenstock prominently mounted on the wall of Trotsky’s study and savagely strikes his victim three times. Virtually every detail in this scene involves fabrication and falsification. Trotsky did not know that Jacson was a GPU agent. The alpenstock with which Trotsky was assaulted was concealed in Jacson’s raincoat. Worst of all, the assassin is portrayed as a hero who correctly defends Stalin and has held the moral high ground in all his conversations with Trotsky. Finally, Jacson/Mercader mercifully delivers his tormented victim from his empty and meaningless life.

The film concludes with a bizarre fantasy. After he has been killed, Trotsky is seen walking into a blizzard before being run over by his civil war armored train, which had appeared in every episode as Trotsky’s virtual alter-ego (heartless, relentless, merciless in its destructive power).

This film is a travesty of history. All who participated in its production have brought shame upon themselves.

A few historians have made criticisms of the series after seeing the first episodes. Konstantin Skorkin, author of a major study of oppositionists victimized by Stalin, wrote an article entitled, “The serial ‘Trotsky’ has become the next pseudo-historical hack-work of Channel One.”

Joshua Rubenstein, author of the 2011 biography *Leon Trotsky*, said in September: “I’m intrigued by the idea that the producers would put Trotsky in the center of the narrative and not Lenin. I wonder what their intention is by putting an explicitly Jewish figure like Trotsky at the center of the story.” He continued: “If they’re saying that Trotsky was behind the execution of the Tsar [as the film suggests], that’s simply not true. Lenin and Sverdlov executed the Tsar... If they’re saying it was Trotsky, then I really question their motives because this is a very

sensitive point. ... Trotsky always wanted to bring the Tsar to trial and serve as a prosecutor. ... The Tsar is an honored figure by the Russian Orthodox Church—to say that a Jew was behind his execution is a very incendiary accusation.”

Aleksandr Reznik, who has written two books on Trotsky, summed up the serial’s problems; “In essence, the problems with *Trotsky* flow one after the other: 1) disregard for historical context, 2) tendentious interpretation of events, and 3) widespread distortion of facts.” Given that the serial played prominently on Channel One, Reznik concludes that the creators of *Trotsky* “bear responsibility for the falsification of history before an enormous audience.”

As Trotsky wrote eighty years ago, the lie is the ideological cement of social and political reaction. The interests and the very survival of the present ruling capitalist oligarchy, like the Stalinist bureaucracy from which it emerged, depend upon lies.

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